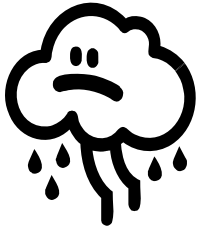


# Department of Human Services

## Articles in Today's Clips Monday, December 4, 2006

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Prepared by the  
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\*Important story at this spot

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Michigan Report

December 1, 2006

### **OMBUDSMAN'S REPORT SHOWS NONCOMPLIANCE UP OVER PREVIOUS YEARS**

A new report by the Office of Children's Ombudsman shows that noncompliance with policy or statute remains the biggest problem in the Department of Human Services and private child-placing agencies, with 2004-2005 findings above any numbers since 2000-2001.

The report, which is scheduled to be reviewed by the House Family and Children Services Committee on Tuesday, cites 109 individual findings of noncompliance, compared to 37 findings of poor practice or decision making, nine findings of current law or policy being inadequate and four findings of system problems.

The children's ombudsman concluded that some Child Protective Service cases are not fully investigated in cases of abuse or neglect, the case was not reviewed within the required timeframe or the information provided was inaccurate or insufficient. The report also found that CPS supervisors do not always review their co-workers' reports at all or in the time allotted.

The report also found that siblings were separated and that the separation is maintained without proper justification or the caregiver is not properly notified. Children who remained in the home when their siblings were placed somewhere else also did not have their safety comprehensively assessed in some instances. Children's needs were also not properly assessed in some occurrences while they were in foster care, the report states.

During the period from 2004-2005, the office received 782 complaints and inquiries involving 1,393 children from 72 of the state's 83 counties. The largest group of complainants was birth parents, followed by foster parents, grandparents and other relatives.

Of the complaints, 105 were classified as inquiries, meaning they address general aspects of the child welfare system. Another 118 were deemed referrals, meaning the children's ombudsman is not authorized to deal with the agency the complaint is regarding.

Of the remaining total, 111 complaints were opened for investigation while 371 complaints were classified as "valid complaints-not opened" because the nature of the complaint was not something the children's ombudsman could provide an outcome for or an issue arose that was dealt with in new policy or statute.

Of the complaints that proceeded to an investigation, 43 involved Child Protective Services, 16 dealt with foster care, 5 were for adoption services and 47 crossed over several categories. Of those, 38 resulted in the agency's actions being affirmed by the children's ombudsman; 17 were closed because the investigations resulted in administrative resolutions and 16 were classified as exceptional closings, where the office deems it cannot affect the outcome of the case or the agency has already initiated corrective action.

The children's ombudsman made a series of four recommendations, including that CPS workers understand and apply the concept of "threatened harm" while they conduct field investigations, complete dispositions or make decisions on a new child who is born to parents whose parental rights with other children have been terminated.

In response, DHS stated that a policy bulletin has been released on the issue of threatened harm, that the Child Welfare Institute provides training to new workers on the matter and supervisors are also mandated to undergo training.

The report also recommends the department make certain that Medicaid Assistance cases are registered and opened within five business days for children who are eligible, which includes nearly every child committed to or placed with DHS by the court or who reside in out-of-home care because of abuse or neglect.

DHS agreed with the recommendation, though stated that there are cases where care is delayed because a child who enters the foster care program and is active on a parent's or caregiver's Medicaid case will remain active until the end of the month in which he or she is removed. A new case is not opened until the first day of the new month. There are also issues that enrollment plans outside a relative's community may prohibit access to the preferred service provider.

The department said that relative caregivers are given information about processing a new Medicaid case and that the Field Office Administration is working with Medicaid/Supplemental Security Income staff to allow eligibility specialists to transfer a child's open Medicaid case at the time he or she enters care. The department has allocated specialists in counties with large Title-IV-E eligible caseloads.

The report also outlines a recommendation for the department to specify the procedures for identifying, locating and consulting with relatives about making foster care placements. The department agreed in part with the recommendation and stated that in the last 10 years the number of children placed with relative caregivers has increased by 66.29 percent. DHS agreed to post bulleted information on the steps of going over placement of a child with a relative, although the policy is already expressed.

DHS also discussed its Family-to-Family program, which has been implemented in 18 of the 83 counties as of the report's publishing.

The last recommendation made by the children's ombudsman is that, for cases in which the Family Division of the Circuit Court takes jurisdiction of a child, that measures be taken to strengthen the state's ability to provide permanency, stability and security of that child. That recommendation includes established subsidized guardianship in the state either with state funds or with federal matching dollars and putting "permanent guardianship" into state law.

DHS agreed in part with the recommendation, saying that in 2004 the idea of subsidies was explored with Title-IV-E waivers, but that it was determined there was no adequate funding sources available for the program. There are "Kinship Pilot" programs in Kent and Wayne counties where enhanced services are provided to family caregivers.

The department also stated it felt that current policy sufficiently addresses the issue of guardianship.

Published December 2, 2006  
[ From Lansing State Journal ]

Local news briefs

## **State office to release Holland report**

The state office that investigated the Department of Human Services' handling of the Ricky Holland case expects to release its report soon, Children's Ombudsman Verlie Ruffin said Friday.

"I probably won't release it until early next week," she said. Officials are working to redact confidential information included in foster care and adoption records, as required by state and federal law, Ruffin said.

The Office of Children's Ombudsman, established by the Legislature in 1994, investigates cases handled by the human services department. The findings include recommendations made to the department and the agency's response to those recommendations.

Ricky's parents, Tim and Lisa Holland, are both in prison for their roles in his death.

Published December 2, 2006

## **To the Point**

A Lansing State Journal editorial

# **For the children, remember**

Lisa Holland received the maximum dose of justice this week, courtesy of Judge Paula Manderfield. Holland was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole for killing her adopted 7-year-old son, Ricky Holland.

While applauding that sentence, though, Michiganians should remember the words Manderfield issued at sentencing: "You buried your dog, but you threw away your child."

In just a few weeks, Gov. Jennifer Granholm and the Legislature will begin work on a new state budget that covers how much effort is put into protecting Michigan's children.

Such protective work must compete for limited dollars with the myriad other state responsibilities. And, being human, time will blunt the horror of Ricky's life and death in our minds.

To counter that, though, we need only recall Manderfield's words and message behind them: Children suffer in our state; will we protect them?



## Mother of abused kids goes to jail

Saturday, December 02, 2006

ALLEGAN -- A 27-year-old mother of four who police say knew that male relatives were abusing children in her home, including her 8-year-old daughter, was sentenced to eight months in jail Friday. Melissa Rupert also was given five years of probation and must register as a sex offender after being sentenced on a charge of second-degree child abuse. Rupert's husband, James Rupert, and his father, Ronald Rupert, earlier were sentenced to prison terms on sex assault charges for what police called one of the worst child-abuse cases in Allegan County. Detectives seized 80,000 pornographic images from the Allegan area home.

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# THE DAILY Reporter

[Print this story](#)

## Wertz-Hale's fate to be decided by 12 jurors

[Print Page](#)

By Don Reid-Staff Writer

COLDWATER — The public should learn this week about what happened to two children of Jonathan Hale at the end of May 2003 before they were rushed near death to a Kalamazoo hospital June 6 of that year.

Jury selection will begin this morning in the case against the stepmother, Brandalyn Wertz-Hale, 24, charged with first degree child abuse, a 15-year felony.

Prosecutor Kirk Kashian said he would prove from Memorial Day until June 6 that Hale did intentionally fail to provide or withheld water or provided salt to the then 2-year-old daughter and 4-year-old son of her boyfriend, now husband.

The children had spent a week's visitation at the father's home in Quincy with the couple and two other children.

When they returned from visitation, the children's mother took them to emergency room at the Community Health Center of Branch County in Coldwater. They were rushed to Kalamazoo with the girl listed as critical and the boy serious when they were admitted to Bronson Methodist Hospital. Both recovered after treatment. Doctors testified at hearings that the children were close to death from dehydration.

Both the prosecution and defense attorney Rhonda Ives have expert witnesses set to testify about salt and hydration of children.

Kashian and Assistant Prosecutor Terri Norris have listed 21 potential witnesses of which five are doctors who treated the children or reviewed the medical files.

Ives has listed 16 other witnesses who may testify for the defense in the case. Many are friends and family.

Branch County Circuit Court Judge Michael Cherry set aside four days this week for the 12-member jury to hear the case and decided the guilt or innocence of Wertz-Hale.

Included on the defense list of witnesses is husband Jonathan Hale who will tried next month on the same charges. His attorney J. R. Colbeck asked for a separate trial because of conflicts in the defense.

Judge Cherry will have to rule on the admissibility of evidence the state collected during its investigation, including a video taped interview of Wertz-Hale. Police also collected notes between the couple and files off the home computer.

Kashian dismissed the original child abuse, second degree charge, a four-year felony, to file the more serious offense. That dismissal was appealed delaying the trial until now, over three years after the incidents.

The standard of proof between the two charges is large. For first degree child abuse, the prosecutor must prove the "defendant knowingly or intentionally causes serious physical harm or serious mental harm to a child." Intent to do the harm must be shown.

Jurors could also consider as a lesser included offense also charged in the information,

second degree child abuse.

Under second degree charge, the prosecution only must show the "defendant willfully abandons the child, fails to provide food, clothing or shelter necessary for the child's welfare or commits a reckless act which results in serious physical/mental harm" with no intent to seriously harm the victim required.

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# ClickOnDetroit.com

## Police: Man Attempted To Abduct 14-Year-Old Girl

POSTED: 11:04 am EST December 4, 2006

Detroit police are investigating an attempted abduction.

Police said a black man driving a black Dodge Intrepid approached a 14-year-old girl who was waiting at a bus stop at Fenkell and Telegraph roads.

The man allegedly tried to talk the girl into getting into the car, when police said the girl ran to another bus stop and told her parents.

Police will release a description of the man, and Local 4 News and ClickOnDetroit.com as we update this developing story.

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## Would access to abuse list make kids safer?

Sunday, December 3, 2006

By Scott Hagen

shagen@citpat.com -- 768-4929

The state of Michigan maintains a list of 317,000 people who child advocates believe are a threat to children.

These people can't become foster parents and may not be allowed to adopt a child. They can't open or work at a child-care center.

They can, however, work at your child's school.

The Central Registry, compiled by the state Department of Human Services, is a confidential list of people accused of neglect, or physical or sexual abuse of a child. To end up on the registry, state social workers must believe the person has committed a crime, but the person doesn't have to be convicted or even arrested.

DHS is the only agency with access to the registry, which was started in the mid-1970s. Offenders are automatically notified that they're on the list. Unless someone successfully appeals, they are on the list for life.

The only way for schools to use the registry would be to require prospective employees to prove their absence from the list before they are hired, said Steve Yager, director of the office of family advocate at DHS. An individual can do so by obtaining a receipt from a local DHS branch that indicates he or she is not on the Central Registry, Yager said.

But many school officials contacted for this story say they weren't aware of the Central Registry, or didn't know they could require job candidates to prove their absence from the list.

"If they can't be involved in day-care operations, how on Earth should they be allowed in the public schools?" said Western Schools Superintendent William Coale. "At the very minimal level, school districts should be privy to that information, because we're talking about child safety."

The purpose of the Central Registry is to keep children away from potential predators or abusers.

When the department is called to a complaint, a social worker will assign the case a certain category, with Category 1 and Category 2 being the most serious.

Offenders from those two categories are placed on the Central Registry if there is a "preponderance of evidence that the abuse took place."

Yager said DHS isn't aware of any school districts that routinely require employees to prove they're not on the list.

"I don't understand that, that's absolutely absurd ... that's jeopardizing the safety of all the children," said Kitrina Sims, a grandmother of three boys at Jackson's Frost Elementary School. "They need to utilize that list in order to protect our children."

All districts conduct criminal background checks as required by state law. Still, there are some on the Central Registry who don't have a criminal record.

For example, if prosecutors couldn't recommend charges against someone because a child is too young or unwilling to testify in a sexual abuse case, that person wouldn't be charged criminally but could end up on the registry.

Child advocates say they see merit in exploring how schools might be able to use the registry.

"What we do in child protection and in child welfare is far too often what I call 'deep end.' It's in the end after something drastic has happened," said Sharon Peters, executive director of Michigan's Children, a child advocacy group.

"The measures we advocate for the strongest are prevention measures. An awareness of that registry, and some review and thoughtful ways to recommend how that registry might be helpful to school districts would be worthwhile."

Other school officials, when made aware of the central registry, agree the list deserves exploration.

"I don't think there would be harm in using it as another tool to check," said Michigan Center Superintendent Mark Haag. "I would agree that it could be another avenue to check things out, or try to maintain some safety on who's working with the kids. It's something to look into."

A'Lynne Robinson, community outreach coordinator with Jackson Public Schools, stood by the district's screening process using the criminal background check.

"I think we're doing what's available to us to do the best possible job to make the students safe," she said. "I feel like we put a system in place to look at the records and backgrounds of our teachers who are working for us at this time."

State Sen. Mark Schauer, D-Battle Creek, said he wanted to explore the Central Registry issue more before rendering a verdict, but said "Anything we can do to keep children safe we should consider. It sounds like it could be a red flag that could be a piece of information that schools could consider."

DHS' Yager also agreed it would allow schools one more avenue to ensure a child's safety.

Others, however, believe a districts efforts would be better spent elsewhere.

"I understand it's an issue of trying to protect kids," said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, a senior research associate with the Michigan League of Human Services, a child-advocacy group.

"But in all the ways we could protect children, I'm not sure I would put all my energy here in this particular domain."

Zehnder-Merrell went on to say that keeping children safe is well beyond just a list, it involves fixing bigger problems of child poverty and fixing growing economic insecurities.

Still, others concerned with the safety of children -- in and out of the classroom -- agree that exploring a cross-communication effort between state agencies and schools could help.

"It's certainly in the public interest to raise the question. ! There isn't a superintendent on Earth who wants to endanger a child," Coale said. "If there's a likelihood that folks will physically, emotionally or sexually hurt a child, that raises great concerns with me."

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## Care House, lawyers to raise funds for kids

**BY DAN CORTEZ**  
 FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

*December 4, 2006*

Jim Miller heard about the horrid child abuse case last week that was uncovered in Warren.

Twin 8-year-old girls told investigators they were beaten and bruised at the hands of their adoptive mother, who also made them sleep on the floor without blankets. But while the degree of alleged abuse was unique, the news of children being abused was nothing new.

"You hear about a case almost every week," said Miller, president of the Macomb County Bar Foundation.

With that in mind, Care House of Macomb County, which provides services and counseling to children 12 and younger who have been sexually or physically abused, will host its 10th annual Christmas for Kids fund-raiser tonight.

The bar foundation is partnering with Care House for the event.

"Their role is a very important one and it's legal-related," Miller said of Care House, which interviews about 300 children annually after they have been abused. "We're showing that we're wanting to do more."

Macomb County Sheriff Mark Hackel, who sits on Care House's board of directors, said the nonprofit has been an invaluable tool to police departments throughout the county.

Care House, in Mt. Clemens, has specially trained interviewers who talk to children about what happened to them while investigators watch the interviews on a closed-circuit television.

Hackel said the environment Care House provides is much more comfortable for children than talking to a detective at a police station, or having to repeat their story to several officers.

"When it comes to interviewing a child, it's very difficult and it takes quite a bit of training," he said. "They lessen the impact by the setting itself. It really helps us out tremendously."

Dorie Vazquez-Nolan, the group's director of operations, said Care House doesn't house children, but it's packed with toys and games to make the children more comfortable. Follow-up counseling for the abused child and family members also is provided.

About 500 people are expected tonight at Mac & Ray's Banquet Center in Harrison Township for the fund-raiser.

Organizers are hoping to raise about \$85,000, with two-thirds of that going Care House and the rest to the bar foundation, which uses the money to help several organizations. Care House's annual budget is \$660,000.

Contact **DAN CORTEZ** at 586-469-1827 or [dcortez@freepress.com](mailto:dcortez@freepress.com).



Robynn Thomas inflates a palm tree Sunday at Mac & Ray's Banquet Center in Harrison Township. Thomas volunteered to help with the setup of a fund-raiser to benefit Care House, which helps abused children. (BRIAN WIDDIS/Special to the Free Press)

### Event is tonight in Harrison Township

Tickets to the 10th annual Care House Christmas for Kids event are \$75 and can be purchased at the door.

The fund-raiser is 5-11 p.m. today at Mac & Ray's Banquet Center, 30675 North River Road, Harrison Township. The event will include a cash bar, foods from a number of restaurants and an auction that will feature trips to Las Vegas, tickets to sporting events and electronics.

Tickets can be paid for at the door with cash, check or any major credit card.

For information, call Care House at 586-463-0123.

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[Print Page](#)

Cass meth tide seems to be turning

By JOHN EBY / Dowagiac Daily News  
Friday, December 1, 2006 10:20 AM EST

Like other criminals, meth makers adapt, Cass County authorities contacted for Thursday's National Methamphetamine Awareness Day point out.

So dents made in the past two years by expanding the drug team the Sheriff's Office and Dowagiac Police Department have shared since 1999 won't quell the epidemic without continued law enforcement pressure.

The five-member Cass County Drug Enforcement Team (CCDET) of the Sheriff's Office and city police force resulted from voters approving a half-mill, four-year property tax levy in August 2004 to step up the battle against meth beginning in January 2005.

Capt. Lyndon Parrish, a 20-year veteran of the Cass County Sheriff's Office, sees several trends.

Due to increased laws on chemicals used to make meth and the advent of Glotel, a pink substance now placed in much of the ammonia used in the fields that decreases its potency and makes it harder to use in making meth, authorities are seeing fewer calls of stolen anhydrous ammonia from farmers.

Instead, cooks resort to other items, such as non-liquid fertilizers, from which they can leach ammonia.

"This is good in that it means less chances for dangerous ammonia leaks from tanks near residences," Parrish said Wednesday.

"Due to increased laws on ephedrine tablets," Parrish says, "we're finding fewer labs as well. What we're finding is that people are going 'pill shopping' - going from place to place to get enough pills to make meth. Locally, they have gone as far as the UP (Upper Peninsula) or even into Ohio to do this. One thing this law has done is make ephedrine pills as valuable as the meth. Some persons are even trading pills for meth. We've been working with the sellers of the pills - pharmacists, etc. - and the officers from the counties next to us to track this and to work together to get a bigger picture on how much this is happening."

As far as the team and millage cramping the local meth trade, "We put a large dent in the meth trafficking and cooking within the county for the first couple of years," Parrish said. "But now we've got to keep up the pressure."

"What we saw initially," he said, "is that after the first year, meth lab callouts and callouts to clean up dumped meth labs decreased substantially. We arrested a lot of our meth cooks within the county and they underwent treatment at the jail and many had their children temporarily removed from them as well."

But within the last three to four months, he noted, "We're starting to find more labs again and most of the labs we've found are from people that we locked up over a year ago."

"We've had two cases where the same parents have had their children taken from them again by DHS (state Department of Human Services). The good thing is that we're not seeing many new names involved in producing and distributing meth and there are some old names that we aren't seeing," Parrish said. "This tells us that our efforts are at least keeping new criminals from coming into our county to cook and some of the prior meth producers have apparently stopped their involvement in it."

Parrish said, "One thing that disturbed us is that when the discovered meth labs started going down, we starting hearing from some people that the meth epidemic was over in Cass County. That obviously is not true. Like other criminals they adapt. Although we went through a six-month lull in labs, as did other counties around us, now they are actually back on the rise in our county. We've taken down three labs within the last two months and are receiving tips weekly of more locations."

Parrish said law enforcement needs to "continue to work with our partners at the federal, state and local level to adapt as well and keep up the pressure so that the makers and sellers of this drug know that our county is not the place to go."

"The meth scourge has been dealt a real setback in Cass County," according to Prosecutor Victor Fitz. "The citizens' drug millage has made much of this possible."

Fitz said it has "provided an aggressive drug team and tough drug prosecutions. These efforts, combined with innovative legislation, proper sentencing and a family drug court, have helped stem the meth tide in Cass County."

"Major cookers have been arrested and sent to prison," Fitz said Wednesday. "CCDET officers have proven very effective in ferreting out and rounding up the meth crowd in all corners of this county. The prosecutor's office has convicted 100 percent of felony meth offenders who have gone to jury. While there continue to be meth arrests in the area, we have seen a significant decrease in the sophistication and effectiveness of the meth manufacturers. Meth producers are looking over their shoulder. They are on the run."

Fitz agrees with Parrish that "it is essential to remain vigilant."

"Otherwise," the prosecutor said, "meth activity will rebound with a vengeance. Fighting meth, cocaine, heroin, marijuana, hallucinogens and other drugs is a never-ending process. The pressure must remain constant."

"The voters deserve tremendous credit for addressing this drug problem," Fitz said. "Thanks to the millage, meth has a tough adversary in Cass County."

Steve Lehman, addictions program supervisor for Cassopolis-based Woodlands Behavioral Healthcare Network, said Thursday that meth primary treatment admissions have dropped from 10 percent to 3 percent for the period April 1 through Sept. 30.

They had been running 10 percent along with crack cocaine.

"I would attribute this to law enforcement efforts," Lehman said. "I believe the Sheriff's Office and prosecutor are doing a great job with arrests, prosecutions and lab busts, as well as public education and retailer efforts and laws that restrict access to primary over-the-counter drugs used for manufacture."

"Once the precursor supply line catches up, I think meth will go back up, but not over the long term be sustained at the level of the top three," Lehman said.

"Of significance, and somewhat typical of society," Lehman said, "is that our admissions for the past 18 years have been consistent, with alcohol, marijuana and cocaine as one, two and three, respectively. I believe we will see an increase in heroin as that drug typically follows on the wave of meth, and steady, slow growth in oxycontin-related drugs.

"We are hearing anecdotally of more heroin moving in," Lehman said, "but not yet seeing them in treatment."

# Meth Labs Dropping In 2006

MIRS, Friday, December 1, 2006

The Michigan State Police (MSP) reported Thursday that the number of reported methamphetamine labs in Michigan have been cut by more than half in 2006. Since 2005, the state saw a "significant" decrease that earned the Great Lakes States national recognition for its work in slowing the spread of the deadly drug.

Mary Ann **SOLBERG**, deputy director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, praised Michigan at a Capitol press conference Thursday for its work in "combating the deadly scourge of methamphetamine." Nationwide meth lab incidents are down 30 percent.

"Since methamphetamine emerged on the West Coast almost a decade ago, and well before it hit the shores of Michigan, officials here in our state were taking measures to stem the tide of this toxic drug through prevention, education and enforcement," said MSP Director Col. Peter **MUNOZ**. "By working together with law enforcement, human services, health care, business and environmental experts, we are gaining ground in this fight."

Methamphetamine is a stimulant that can be "cooked" by using elements found at Wal-Mart or the common one-stop shopping store — Red Devil lye, paint thinner, drain cleaner, iodine and ammonia among other chemicals. Meth "cooks" basically strip out ephedrine or pseudoephedrine from nasal decongestants and create an illegal narcotic. The byproducts can turn a meth "lab" into a toxic clean-up site.

The Legislature has passed a bevy of bills designed to cut into the problem, including putting Sudafed and similar medications behind the pharmacy counter and requiring those wanting to buy multiple packets to sign a registry.

New laws put into the books also require law officials to post meth lab locations on the Internet and prohibit folks from posting methamphetamine-making instructions on the Internet, among other measures.

Munoz said he's thankful for the job the Legislature has done in giving law enforcement the tools needed to drop the number of meth labs found in Michigan from 261 in 2005 to 100 in 2006 as of Nov. 18. From 2000 to 2005, the number of meth labs had been steadily increasing from 40 in 2000 to 209 in 2004.

In 2005, Michigan was 11th in the nation for meth incidents reported to the federal government with 451. That number has dropped to 105 this year.

The number of people being treated for methamphetamine also dropped in Fiscal Year (FY) 2006 from FY 2005 from 1,628 to 1,345. The number had been rising every year from FY 1999 to FY 2005 up to that point.

Michigan also has developed a drug endangered children (DEC) protocol and put new laws on the books that allow prosecutors to hit meth cooks with child abuse if their work is done in the presence of children. Also, the Office of Drug Control Policy received a \$1 million, three-year grant designed to prevent meth abuse.

Munoz said throwing more money at the problem hasn't necessarily been an option during these last few cash-strapped budget years. Rather, it's forced the MSP to work with county and local officials on joint drug task forces.

"There's nothing like a little adversity to pull groups together and pool resources to go at it," he said.

# **Granholtm Wants Merit/Tax Plan Before Welfare Talk**

MIRS, Friday, December 1, 2006

Gov. Jennifer [\*\*GRANHOLM\*\*](#) made it clear today that if the Legislature wants her to consider it's latest offering in establishing life-time limits on welfare recipients, lawmakers need to act on her revamped Merit Scholarship plan and her Michigan Business Tax (MBT) proposal.

During her press availability today on long-term health care, the Governor was asked her opinion on the new Republican welfare plan that legislative leaders say gives into all of Granholtm's suggested improvements on plans prior (See related story).

"The Legislature needs to first address the issues of our economy that are on the front burner and that means providing access to college for families," she said. "That means passing the Merit Scholarship. It means addressing the tax situation. Those are the issues on the very front burner. Those are the issues I'd like to see addressed."

Today's comments give further proof that the Governor appears ready to deal with the Republican-led Legislature in the closing weeks of the lame duck session and her top two legislative issues haven't changed. She wants to see the one-time \$2,500 Merit award given to college-bound students who graduated high school with a 3.0 turned into a \$4,000 award given in tiers through the students' first two years of advanced schooling.

She also wants the passage of her three-factor MBT, which she envisions replacing the soon-to-be expired Single Business Tax (SBT). The short-lived Republican majority in the House, however, doesn't appear to be in a hurry to pass either.



## Oakland County officials push sale of nursing home

### Golden Oaks deal could be finalized by end of March

**BY KATHLEEN GRAY**  
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

*December 4, 2006*

The Golden Oaks Medical Care Facility is on the block in Oakland County.

Officials are trying to sell the nursing facility during a lame-duck session in which Republicans still hold a commanding edge on the Oakland County Board of Commissioners.

The facility is home to 88 patients, mostly Medicaid or Medicare recipients, who require long-term care. The county has run it since 1977.

But in recent years, the county has had to significantly subsidize the facility.

For 2006, the county's cost is projected to be nearly \$2 million. The 2006-07 budget included \$2.7 million for the facility.

County officials started looking at the possibility of selling the facility in March, but they encountered resistance from some Democrats on the county board who weren't anxious to sell a home that was the final refuge for some physically challenged, financially strapped residents.

Democrats thought the matter was put on hold when they approved the \$2.7-million subsidy for the home in September.

But on Thursday, all the commissioners were handed a proposal that would contract the operations of Golden Oaks to Ciena Healthcare Management of Southfield, for an annual fee of \$500,000.

After three years, the county would relinquish control of Golden Oaks to Ciena, which has guaranteed a new nursing home for the residents and promised that at least 120 beds would be set aside for Medicare or Medicaid patients.

The company also agreed to hire the Golden Oaks staff.

"If they get a better deal out of this for the county, we owe it to the seniors to have something good," said Maria Benavides, a Franklin resident who was unhappy with the facility and transferred her mother to another one in August.

The matter is scheduled for consideration by three county board committees this week and the full board on Dec. 14, the last meeting of the year.

The fast pace is unusual, but not entirely unexpected.

On Jan. 1, Democrats will pick up two more seats on the county board as a result of the Nov. 7 election, narrowing the partisan divide to 13 Republicans and 12 Democrats.

Chances for approval of the sale are better before the end of the year.

Democrats aren't necessarily opposed to the idea, but object to the fast track of the proposal, which would normally take at least one month to go through the normal board process.

"I'm not opposed to the idea of a management contract. With that type of model, sometimes you get better expertise," said Helaine Zack, D-Huntington Woods.

#### Meetings this week

Three Oakland County committees will consider a proposal to privatize the Golden Oaks Medical Care Facility. The meetings are open to the public:

- The general government committee will meet at 2 p.m. Monday.
- The personnel committee will meet at 9:30 a.m. Wednesday.

- The finance committee will meet at 9 a.m. Thursday.

The meetings will be held in the Board of Commissioners' committee room at 1200 N. Telegraph in Pontiac.

"But it always makes me suspicious that you want to push things through in lame duck when the dynamic is changing."

County Executive L. Brooks Patterson said his only concern was the financial drain that Golden Oaks is on the county.

"I don't want any more loose ends going into another year," he said. "With each passing month, we're losing \$200,000 there."

If the proposal passes, county officials hope to finalize a deal with Ciena by the end of March. The company owns 27 nursing homes with 2,600 patients in Michigan, including one in West Bloomfield.

Macomb County continues to operate a nursing home -- the Martha T. Berry Medical Care Facility, which underwent major renovations this year and houses 217 patients.

The home costs the county about \$1 million to \$3 million to operate, and some Republicans on the Macomb County Board of Commissioners have suggested that the county should privatize the facility.

Wayne County does not own or operate any medical care facilities.

Contact **KATHLEEN GRAY** at 313-223-4407 or [gray@freepress.com](mailto:gray@freepress.com).

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## Teen charged in girl's death

Friday, December 01, 2006

**The Grand Rapids Press**

GRAND RAPIDS -- A few hours of toying with a loaded gun could send a Grand Rapids teenager to prison for 15 years after he accidentally shot and killed a female friend early Wednesday, authorities said.

Kent County prosecutors issued an involuntary manslaughter charge against Aaron Miggins on Thursday, the day after Alysia Davis died from a single shot to her head.

Miggins, 17, was to be arraigned today in Grand Rapids District Court on the felony charge.

Police say Davis, 16, died from the injury she suffered when the handgun discharged as a group of teens hung out in an apartment at 818 Carrier Creek Blvd. NE about 5 a.m.

Detectives said Thursday there was no argument or fight before the shooting, which witnesses described as an accident. People in the apartment called 911.

Davis, who attended Wyoming's Omega Alternative High School, was discovered outside the apartment building, but police believe she was shot inside.

Miggins' juvenile court record shows he was charged in 2000, at the age of 11, with assault and battery, larceny under \$200 and three counts of retail fraud.

In 2005, he was found guilty of possessing and concealing stolen property.

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## 1 in 5 get food help

Unemployment, 'working poor' swell county numbers

### GENESEE COUNTY

#### THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Monday, December 04, 2006

By Ron Fonger

rfonger@flintjournal.com • 810.766.6317

GENESEE COUNTY - More than one of every five households in the county now is receiving federal food assistance - the highest level since at least February 2002 -and the numbers show no sign of dropping.

The federally funded food stamp program paid an average of \$72.78 monthly to 77,639 people in 35,156 households here in September, according to the most recent report from the Michigan Department of Human Services.

September was the tenth straight month in which the number of households receiving benefits increased.

The most recent increases are due to high unemployment and a sharp reduction in the number of jobs that pay enough to keep families out of poverty, state and nonprofit officials said.

"When you are without a pension and had low income (before retirement), this is vital," said one Flint woman, 83, who signed up for assistance at a health fair about a year ago. "You need a supplement when you don't know where your next meal is coming from."

The former Smith-Bridgeman Co. store clerk and others receiving assistance asked The Flint Journal not to use their names, a sign that there remains a stigma associated with the program despite changes to it and more and more people receiving aid.

DHS has tried to combat that feeling by shifting from paper food stamps to debit cards and ramping up efforts to enroll senior citizens without the traditional interview and enrollment at a DHS office.

As home heating and other costs have risen and with good jobs still hard to find, it's no wonder more people are receiving help, said Terri L. Stangl, executive director of the Center for Civil Justice in Flint.

"One of the things about food stamps is you are seeing more working people who are eligible now because their wages have not kept up," Stangl said. "If the paycheck is diminishing or not growing, it becomes more difficult."

Unemployment in the county fell to 7.3 percent in October, still the highest regional unadjusted rate in Michigan. And a Census Bureau report in August showed Flint has become the poorest large city in Michigan, with nearly one in every three people living below the poverty level.

Web sites such as <http://www.foodstamphelp.org/> can help determine if an individual qualifies for food assistance. The Michigan Food Stamp Hotline (1-800-481-4989) also answers questions.

The Michigan League for Human Services says food assistance is available primarily to families with gross monthly incomes of 130 percent of the federal poverty level or less.

Jim Nye, director of field operations for DHS, said program changes are partly responsible for more people than ever qualifying for benefits throughout Michigan.

Nye also cited the economy and high poverty as key reasons for 1.1 million people now collecting food assistance in the state.

The county's current food assistance enrollment numbers may be the highest ever.

As recently as September 2000, just 17,073 households were receiving food assistance here.

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Dec 2, 1:44 PM EST

## **Police call over stolen \$5 ends in arrest on owed child support**

LAKE TOWNSHIP, Mich. (AP) -- A man who called police to report having \$5 in change stolen was arrested after authorities learned he was wanted on a warrant for being more than \$20,000 behind on his child support.

Baroda-Lake Township police on Friday arrested Julius David Romhilt, 41, of Berrien County's Lake Township, after he called police to report the money was taken from his room at an assisted living facility.

Police Chief Gary Ruhl told The Herald-Palladium of St. Joseph that he and another officer learned Romhilt was wanted and arrested him without incident. A court official said he owed \$20,835.

A person who answered the phone at the assisted living facility said Romhilt wasn't there Saturday.

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Information from: The Herald-Palladium, <http://www.heraldpalladium.com>

Dec 2, 1:44 PM EST

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Information from: The Herald-Palladium, <http://www.heraldpalladium.com>



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Published December 3, 2006

## Foster parents: Making a positive impact

By SUE LOUNDS  
Lansing Community Newspapers

ST. JOHNS — Foster parenting and adoption go hand-in-hand. But while adoption is forever, foster parenting is temporary. It is a short-term solution to an emergency situation.

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- [Family](#)
- [Kids](#)

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"Foster parents are necessary as the 'place of haven' for foster children who are being removed from neglectful and abusive homes," said Juls Mueller-Hayes, Strong Families/Safe Children Foster Home recruiter for Eaton County.

Most people understand adoption means legally accepting a child into their home with all the responsibilities and benefits of natural parents. Foster parenting is a little different.

Foster parents care for a children when their biological parents cannot. Children are placed in foster care while the problems that landed them there are worked out. The primary goal is always to reunite the family. Sometimes that isn't possible, and a new permanent home must be found, through adoption. Foster parents provide love, security and nurturing during the period.

"Foster families have replaced the institutional care that was used in the past because it has been shown to be better for the children to be part of a family," said Mueller-Hayes.

Children in the foster care system are from families that have experienced a crisis which necessitated separation of the child from the parents. There are many reasons for the separations — including physical or sexual abuse, neglect or abandonment, physical or mental illness of a parent, death of the parents or the child's emotional or behavioral problems.

Foster parents provide the basics of day-to-day life - food, clothing and shelter. They receive a monthly reimbursement to help cover living expenses.

"There is a stipend that is paid to offset the costs of childcare, but most foster parents now days say they use their own funds to supplement," said Mueller-Hayes. "The stipend is for food, clothes, allowance, school supplies, uniforms and expenses, everything. It does not approach the rate day care providers receive for children in their home part time."

Foster parents work as part of a team that includes various service providers and, when possible, the natural parents, to provide the help the child and his family need in order to be reunited.

Foster parents do not have to be homeowners or married. They do not have to give up their jobs to stay home full time. Payments for day care are available for foster parents who are working or



continuing their education.

Mueller-Hayes says the need for more foster homes in mid Michigan is an on-going concern.

The DHS Child Welfare Philosophy states "The ideal place for children is in their own home with their own family. When we cannot ensure their safety in the family home, we must place siblings together whenever possible and place them in the most family-like and least restrictive setting required to meet their unique needs ... if that is not possible or appropriate, we must strive to place the child with a foster or adoptive family so the child can stay in his or her school and maintain relationships with friends and family."

To achieve that goal, many more foster care homes are needed.

"It has been shown that most families get into foster care because of their interest in and love for children," said Mueller-Hayes. "Sometimes families apply who are interested in adoption due to personal circumstances, and that is fine as long as they know the main goal of foster care is to return children to their home of origin."

Foster parents need some special qualities and some training. Foster parents need to be good listeners, flexible, realistic, able to laugh and willing to work with others. They receive instruction in areas such as responsibilities as a foster parent; how foster parenting may affect your family; how to help foster children express emotions related to separation from their families; how to discipline in a positive way and how to care for kids with disabilities, medical problems or other special needs.

"Foster parents make a big commitment before they even receive children to take training, to fill out extensive application questions about their background and motivations to foster," said Mueller-Hayes. "They turn in three non-related references and need to have a doctor's statement of health for every member of the family. They agree to a police clearance check for every member of the household."

Mueller-Hayes said some families make modifications to their homes to make sure the home is safe for the ages of the children they are requesting.

Once the foster family is licensed and a child or children are placed in the home, additional training may be offered on handling specific problems such as temper tantrums, depression, bed-wetting and so on.

"Many foster families find it helpful to be part of a support group or network to exchange ideas and resources for the special children they are raising," said Mueller-Hayes.

Foster parenting is not easy, but it can be very rewarding.

"I have heard foster parents quote the quote — 'Fostering is the hardest job you'll ever love,' said Mueller-Hayes. "There is so much investment required on the part of foster parents, but to see the children improve is worth it."

If you are considering becoming a foster parent, families in Eaton County should contact Mueller-Hayes at (517) 543-5844 or [Mueller-HayesJ@Michigan.gov](mailto:Mueller-HayesJ@Michigan.gov). She will send a no-cost information packet and notify you of future training opportunities.

## Spreading Joy: Program benefits foster children



**Jeff Surnow, left, of downstate Bloomfield Hills, hands off Christmas packages to be given to local foster children as part of Operation Good Cheer. About 100 kids in the Upper Peninsula will receive gifts from the program this year. (Journal photo by Christopher Diem)**

**By CHRISTOPHER DIEM** Journal Staff Writer

K.I. Sawyer — Although it lacked flying reindeer and sleigh bells, the sleek, white Cessna Citation jet plane was loaded with toys as it touched down at the Boreal Aviation terminal at Sawyer International Airport Saturday morning.

Pilots Jeff Surnow and Eric Ray of downstate Bloomfield Hills stopped in Marquette briefly to drop off wrapped Christmas presents for foster children as part of Operation Good Cheer.

“We wore the wrong colors,” Surnow remarked to Ray, both of whom were dressed in very un-Santa-like attire, “I told you we should have worn red.”

Operation Good Cheer includes 40 of Michigan’s private child and family social services agencies. Statewide, more than 13,000 new gifts and clothing will be given to about 4,500 children in foster care, residential treatment and group homes. This year, around 100 kids in the Upper Peninsula will get gifts through the program.

Two agencies will be distributing the gifts locally this year, Teaching Family Homes and Child and Family Services of the U.P. Inc. Teaching Family Homes operates group homes while Child and Family Services places children in foster care throughout the U.P.

The event is a volunteer program, coordinated by the State Office of Child and Family Services of Michigan Inc. Gifts are donated by thousands of individuals and people in the business/corporate world, public schools, government agencies.

Jill Krah of Teaching Family Homes said kids started filling out their Christmas “wish lists” in August.

“Operation Good Cheer sends us wish lists, and they ask what you would like, your age, your height, your clothes size,” Krah said. “Operation Good Cheer has a bank of donors that go out and buy all the gifts for all the kids, (and) sort them by their wish list.”

Gifts are picked up from 31 locations around Michigan. They are then sorted, loaded into planes and delivered to regional airports by volunteer pilots.

Tracey Compton, child welfare supervisor with Child and Family Services, said she appreciated everyone involved with the program.

"The pilots are always outstanding. They had tons of presents loaded in their planes," she said. "I think it went really well. The donors do a great job at getting the kids the gifts that they wanted off their wish list. I'm sure the kids are going to be thrilled with what they get."

More than a dozen kids from Teaching Family Homes helped unload the planes, running back and forth between the planes and waiting vehicles parked on the runway.

Boreal Aviation offers its terminal for the gift drop-off

"Boreal Aviation terminal at Sawyer International Airport is proud to help out with this operation," said Michael McNeil, line servicer at the terminal.

Surnow and Ray have been taking part in the program for five years. As he relaxed in the terminal lobby with a hot chocolate after the unloading was finished, Ray said the reason for his volunteering was simple: it's for the kids.

Surnow agreed.

"I do a lot of charities for children, and this is just one more thing to do for the kids," he said.



## KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

### 'You gotta get your grownup on'

Promise sparks dream in high school dropout

Sunday, December 3, 2006

Chanika Wyrick is matter-of-fact in telling her story.

Born 20 years ago in Kalamazoo. Put into foster care at age 6. First group home at 8.

After that, too many placements to count.

"Mom wasn't around. Dad wasn't around," Wyrick says.

"Basically, we were neglected as kids. We really didn't have a family -- just my grandma."

Of her four siblings, one was adopted by a Grand Rapids family, another now lives with a cousin and a third is attending a special school for emotionally impaired children.

As for the youngest sister, Wyrick says, "she's in a foster home. I don't know where."

Two years ago, Wyrick aged out of the foster-care system. A high school dropout uncertain about her future, she returned to live with her grandmother on Rose Street.

The grandmother pushed her to finish high school, so Wyrick went back to adult education in the Kalamazoo Public Schools.

Last winter, Wyrick was talking with Amber Shustha-Chambers, her caseworker at Catholic Family Services, who was assigned to Wyrick through a program for at-risk young adults.

"What about college?" Shustha-Chambers asked.

"What about it?" Wyrick responded, startled. It was something Wyrick had never considered, something she figured wasn't an option for kids like her.

"I think it would be totally paid for with The Kalamazoo Promise," Shustha-Chambers said. "Maybe you should give that a shot."

That conversation changed Wyrick's life.

#### Going to college

It turned out The Promise would cover Wyrick's tuition.

It turned out that she could, and would, enroll in September at Kalamazoo Valley Community College.

It turned out that she loves college, loves learning, loves the idea that she is dreaming big and fulfilling that dream.

She is taking four classes at KVCC this semester -- stress management, college strategies, remedial math and English. If her grades are good enough, she plans to transfer next semester to Wayne State University. She's hoping to get a bachelor's degree in social work.

“I’ve been in the system so long, I think I can give advice to people in the same situation,” she said.

College has been an adjustment, but one that Wyrick has tackled with enthusiasm.

“It’s more work than she thought it would be, and they don’t cater to her the way they did at the alternative school,” Shustha-Chambers says. “But once she learns the proper study skills, she’s way intelligent enough to do really well.”

It helps, her caseworker says, that Wyrick has taken advantage of the support systems available through KVCC.

“Her will to do this is the driving force behind everything,” Shustha-Chambers says. “Obviously, if she didn’t want this, it wouldn’t happen.”

Eating lunch between classes, Wyrick talks at length about the importance of education and making a commitment to school.

“There are lots of days when you don’t want to go to school, but you’ve got no choice in college,” she says, between bites of her sandwich. “If you have an 8 a.m. class, you’ve got to go.”

“College is way different from high school. Not harder. But you’ve got to go to class. It’s all on you. You don’t get as many chances in college.”

“I’m really for all the challenges. I know there’s going to be ups and downs.”

Wyrick says the past year has been a huge turnaround for her.

“A year ago, you’d never think Chanika (would) be in college,” she says. “Last year, I was a teenager going to clubs, partying.”

“Now I’m in college, and I’ve got to think about homework. ... In college, you gotta get your grownup on.”

### **Living her dream**

Wyrick lives on Kalamazoo’s north side, one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods and the heart of Kalamazoo’s African-American community.

Although the neighborhood has had its own turnaround in the past decade, it is still a community struggling with a high dropout rate, high unemployment and poverty. In August, five blocks from Wyrick’s house, a man was shot and killed during a family birthday party.

Yet the north side also seems the neighborhood most galvanized by The Promise. Ministers have been pushing the program hard with their congregations, and black leaders have organized one initiative after another to provide academic support for parents and students.

Wyrick says she’s just one of many in her neighborhood who see The Promise as a way out of poverty. While there are still too many 12-year-olds out late at night, she says, and too many parents who aren’t pushing their children, The Promise has brought a palpable change to the area.

“I’ve seen a lot of people disappear from the street corners and go to college,” she said, ticking off names of friends.

“There are times now when you’ll be walking down the street and see a kid with his head in a book and you’re like, ‘Yo! What you doing?’ and he’ll be like, ‘I’m going back to school because of that Promise.’”

“Before The Promise, nobody really cared about school. People were partying, drinking, hanging out on the corner. Now The Promise is all anybody is talking about. Everybody’s into their schoolbooks.”

She says she’s talking to her brother and a sister about the importance of school. “I want them to use me as an example,” she says. “I tell them, y’all don’t have to drop out.”

These days, Wyrick likes talking about her future. Every day, she says, she thinks about being at Wayne State, walking across campus and going to class. She dreams of getting her degree and sitting in an office

with her social-work clients.

“I don't want to go back to the streets,” she says. “I want to get my education. I want to be a social worker and achieve my dreams.”

Wyrick occasionally sees her mother, who is skeptical that Wyrick will succeed. But she says her father is encouraging, calling whenever she has a test to see how she's done. Her grandmother and Shustha-Chambers also have been supportive, Wyrick says, and just having The Promise makes her feel fortunate.

“I'm very blessed,” she says.

Lunch is over, and Wyrick has work to do.

“I have a paper to write,” she says, with a big smile on her face.

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## Unger's sons to get his assets, an Oakland Co. judge rules

**BY JOHN WISELY**  
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

*December 2, 2006*

The young sons of Florence and Mark Unger will receive all the financial assets of their father, who was convicted this summer of killing their mother at a northern Michigan resort.

Oakland County Circuit Judge Denise Langford Morris approved a default judgment this week of \$10 million after Unger, 45, failed to contest the lawsuit filed by the estate of his late wife. But a trust set up for the couple's two sons, Max, 13, and Tyler, 10, is likely to receive far less.

"This is probably a hedge, if he should come into some money," said lawyer Alan May. "I understand he has a wealthy mother and, given what's going on today, he may decide to write a book."

May estimated the trust could get \$300,000 if current assets are liquidated.

"Unlike many wrongful death cases, the loss of the decedent's life was not the result of an unintentional act, but rather an intentional act," May wrote in seeking the judgment. "This alone justifies the award sought."

In June, a jury convicted Unger of first-degree murder for the 2003 death of his 37-year-old wife. The judgment was based on the loss of her future earnings, the loss of companionship and additional expenses incurred for raising the boys, who now live with their maternal grandparents in Huntington Woods.

Contact **JOHN WISELY** at 248-351-396 or [jwisely@freepress.com](mailto:jwisely@freepress.com).



Mark Unger is serving a life sentence in the death.

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# **Santa's Headquarters searching for children needing Christmas gifts**

Published Friday, December 1, 2006 3:31:48 PM Central Time

IRONWOOD -- Santa's Headquarters is looking for families with children in need of Christmas gifts -- and "elves" to provide gifts or cash donations to buy gifts.

Forms for families to fill out must be returned by Dec. 13 to the Department of Human Services office in Bessemer.

Forms are available in Ironwood at the Michigan state University Extension office and Community Action Agency; Bessemer at the Human Services office and western UP District Health Department; Head Start, Hurley and Bessemer; St. Vincent de Paul, Bessemer and Ironwood; Watersmeet, Nordines and LVD Social Services; Wakefield, Community Mental Health.

## **How to Help**

Those who would like to donate unwrapped gifts valued at \$10 to \$15 can pick up a tag from one of the following locations and return the gift to that site by Dec. 15.

Gift tags are available in Ironwood at Curves, city offices in the Memorial Building, Our Lady of Peace Church, Northwoods Niche and the Gogebic County Senior Center; Bessemer at the Gogebic County Federal Credit Union and Dairy Queen; and Watersmeet at Lac Vieux Desert Casino.

Cash donations may be sent to: St. Vincent DePaul, Attn: Santa's Headquarters, 108 S. Marquette St., Ironwood MI 49938.

Gifts will be distributed Dec. 20 at the Memorial Building in Ironwood and Dec. 21 in Watersmeet at the Lac Vieux Desert Hotel, Room 400 from 3 to 6 p.m.

For more information, call Erin Ross at (906) 364-3753.





## — THE — ANN ARBOR NEWS

### **Busy social worker makes time for this cause**

Helping children get warm clothes has become an annual rite

Sunday, December 03, 2006

**BY SUSAN L. OPPAT**

**News Staff Reporter**

Naomi Williams has the whole shopping-for-Warm-the-Children thing wired.

A social worker at the Hope Clinic in Ypsilanti, Williams is a busy woman. But when she read about The Ann Arbor News' Warm the Children program three years ago, and learned that helping families shop for warm clothes for their children would cost little more than a bit of her time, she knew she wanted to fit it into her schedule.

Now, she shops with a couple of families each year.

"I thought this was a wonderful idea. I know people who can benefit from it. I thought, 'I can do this.' It's something for kids, and kids are close to my heart," the 60-year-old said.

Williams raised her 20-year-old nephew from the time he was 4. He's now attending the University of Toledo. And she spends her days at the Hope Clinic assessing homeless families or those who can't pay the rent or utilities, deciding who gets help, then finding the money or the housing.

She says she does it because "social work chose me."

Williams retired after 27 years working as an adult foster care services coordinator for Washtenaw County. But when she heard about the work at Hope Clinic, the decision to return to work was simple.

"I like helping people. It gives me great joy," Williams said.

Right now, her office is a repository for new toys donated to Hope that will eventually go to some of the 200 families the clinic adopts for Christmas. The toys are stuffed into corners and bags and piled on chairs.

But she was looking for more that she could do.

After she read about Warm the Children, she became one of hundreds of volunteers who meet with families and their children to choose up to \$90 in warm, new clothes for the winter, with money donated by Ann Arbor News readers.

This is the program's 10th year. The number of children covered by the program was increased this year to 2,000, up from 1,600. Every dollar donated goes to clothing, because The News absorbs all administrative costs. And the kids themselves generally get to choose their new clothes, sometimes for the first time ever.

This year, Williams happened to know one of the two families she shopped with. The family of eight has been homeless since mid-summer, the mother working, but the father on disability. Williams had worked with the family at Hope Clinic, trying to find them a place to live. She finally signed them up with Habitat for Humanity.

They were supposed to get into their house in September, then in November. But she shopped with them in October, and doesn't know if they got into the house in time for the holidays.

She hopes so.

But she knows one thing, she said: Those six kids will be warm this winter.

Susan Oppat can be reached at [soppat@annarbornews.com](mailto:soppat@annarbornews.com) or at 734-482-1166.

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**VOICE OF THE PEOPLE**

Monday, December 4, 2006

Bill balances parental

access after a divorce

SPRING ARBOR -- I would like to urge my fellow citizens to add their support to shared-parenting legislation, Michigan House Bill 5267. This bill would assume that a child has the right to equal access to both mom and dad after an unfortunate divorce, and would automatically award joint physical custody unless one parent is proven unfit, unable or unwilling. The current practice of assuming mothers to be the primary and only necessary caregivers of children has been disproven by contemporary research and statistics:

- Fathers provide more direct child care and nurturing than commercial day care.
- Fathers provide great social, cognitive, physical and emotional developmental advantages in a child's life that are lost when he is disenfranchised to every other weekend.
- Children are safer from abuse and neglect in their father's home than their mother's home.
- Children and adults emerging from divided families agree that they would have preferred and benefited from equal time with both parents.

The financial cost of raising children would be shared more evenly in a post-modern Michigan economy where men's wages are falling, and women's wages are rising.

Michigan's current custody/child support industry is dividing fathers from families, and is a primary engine in the breakdown of families, resulting in a myriad of social ills among our youth and greater poverty for single-mother families. All of this creates a greater tax and welfare burden upon our state coffers.

Please ignore the paid lobbying voices of NOW, the custody/support industry, and the state bureaucracies that expand influence and revenue at the cost of our children and families. Support HB 5267!

-- Bob Pletcher



This is a printer friendly version of an article from **Lansing State Journal**. To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

Published December 3, 2006

## Courageous Caroline

5-year-old eastside Lansing girl overcame addiction at birth, now fights cancer

By Chris Andrews  
Lansing State Journal

She is the Princess of Jerome Street, twirling around in her front yard wearing a tutu and cowboy boots.

If life were fair, Caroline Thomas might have been out on the street during last week's balmy fall weather. Climbing into the family's treehouse with her twin brothers, jumping on the trampoline or playing with her kindergarten classmates at Fairview Elementary School.

Instead, 5-year-old Caroline, whose life began with an addiction to crack cocaine, spent her mornings getting radiation treatment at Sparrow Hospital to fight brain cancer that doctors diagnosed in October. She felt poorly last Monday and was hospitalized for a day.

Then word came that she needed additional surgery on Friday to fix a cerebral spinal fluid leak.

"We felt like we had been kicked in the stomach," said Carol Thomas, her adoptive mother. "But I really believe that you are not given anything in life bigger than you can handle. So we handle it each day as it comes along."

The latest surgery went well, but Caroline will be hospitalized a few more days.



(Photo by ROD SANFORD/ Lansing State Journal)  
Brave girl: Caroline Thomas, 5, holds on to mom Mabel Menadier-Thomas after a radiation treatment last week at Sparrow Hospital in Lansing. Caroline has had a cancerous brain tumor removed, and must now undergo radiation and chemotherapy.

### Related news from the Web

- Latest headlines by topic:
- [Food](#) Caroline was diagnosed with brain cancer in October. Surgery removed about 98 percent of the tumor at the base of her skull.
  - [Life](#)
  - [Dessert](#) She has completed the first two weeks of a six-week course of radiation treatment. After a four-week break, she will undergo weekly chemotherapy for 45 weeks.
  - [Health](#)
  - [Medicine](#)
  - [Message Therapy](#) The Thomases say her chances of survival are better than average because the tumor was encapsulated.
  - [Chocolate](#)
  - [Brain Cancer](#)
  - [Acupuncture](#)

### MAILBAG

Powered by Thomas loves getting mail. Send her a card at 1417 Jerome St., Lansing MI 48912

While Caroline has suffered from more than her fair share of blows, her story also is one of courage and strength and unity.

She has been blessed with the love of two mothers - Carol and her partner, Mabel Menadier-Thomas.

Blessed with the support of friends who have made hospital visits, written cards, given blood and prayed for miracles.

"They are the best neighbors you could ever ask for. They are an inspiration," said Lisa Keith, who lives next door.

"They don't question it. They just accept it. I don't think anybody understands why this has to happen to anyone. They are just such a strong family. It's amazing."

The family has had challenges from the start.

Carol Thomas adopted twin brothers Joshua and Jacob as infants seven years ago.

The boys had been exposed to crack cocaine through their biological mother, though neither was addicted.

Carol, who teaches and practices court transcription, and Mabel, who now heads Lansing Community College's massage therapy program, soon had their hands full. Josh, as it turned out, has attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Jacob is autistic. He was having trouble in school, so when a foster caseworker asked them if they would adopt the boys' baby sister two years later, Carol and Mabel declined - for about five minutes.

"We called the caseworker on her cell phone and said yes," Mabel said. "They are family, whether we decided to or not. God made them family."

Caroline was born addicted to crack cocaine. She arched her back when she was held and did a lot of tongue thrusting. She couldn't roll over, and later, when she started walking, stopped talking.

The Thomases used a lot of medical and nonmedical therapies, including acupuncture. By age 2, Caroline was thriving.

She took swimming lessons and learned to ice skate. She roller skates, bowls and enjoys camping.

"We thought the worst was over. We thought this would be the easy child now," Carol said.

At one point, Caroline boldly declared that she had a purpose - and that purpose was Jacob, who would often sit alone twirling something all day.

"He didn't go outside and play. He didn't have any imagination. So she insisted that they played together, and that summer he developed imagination," Carol said. "It was the best therapy that he could have gotten."

Caroline attended preschool and was excited about going on to kindergarten. But about Labor Day, she started getting headaches and vomiting excessively.

At first, Carol and Mabel thought it was the flu, or perhaps nerves about going to school.

After a series of medical tests, an MRI disclosed a tumor the size of a golf ball at the base of her skull. Caroline had brain cancer.

Doctors performed an 8 1/2-hour surgery and removed 98 percent of the tumor. Still, Caroline faces six weeks of radiation treatments, followed by 45 weeks of chemotherapy. She has a 90 percent chance of surviving five years.

All in all, she is standing up to her circumstances remarkably well. In Sparrow Hospital's pediatric intensive care unit last Tuesday, she sat on her hospital bed with Mama Mabel, eating Cheerios and Jet's Pizza that Carol had picked up.

On Wednesday, she was home again, baking cinnamon rolls. On Thursday, she did homework, her favorite part of school.

"It's so fun," she said. "Cutting and pasting and coloring."

Friends, neighbors and co-workers have rallied behind the Thomases. A friend collected \$1,200 to help defray their expenses.

"They must have been selling \$50 cupcakes," Carol said.

When Caroline was in the hospital for 23 days, colleagues of Mabel's brought lunch.

Caroline's kindergarten teacher gave her a small wish box that says: "Big dreams start with small wishes."

"She wrote, 'I wish the world was made of Hershey's chocolate,' and when she came back from one of her surgeries, the box was full of Hershey's kisses," Carol said.

Another friend has organized blood drives. And neighbors plan to build a playroom in the attic to give Caroline more room to roam as she recovers.

Carol and Mabel say they have been overwhelmed by all the help they've received and by Caroline's courage in facing her challenges.

"I believe in higher powers, and we have all the support," Carol said. "So you just pull yourself up by your bootstraps and do it for her."

"If she can do it, we can do it."

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## Educators with least experience teaching low-income students

Sunday, December 3, 2006

By Chad Livengood

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In Jackson Public Schools, elementary schools with the highest percentages of low-income students have the least-experienced teaching staffs.

Meanwhile, those schools where students are better off tend to have faculties filled with veteran instructors, a Citizen Patriot analysis of school district data shows.

The disparity results from a decades-old seniority system of teacher placement that is part of the district's labor contract with the Jackson Education Association. Some say the system has created a class system among haves and have-nots in the district's nine elementary schools.

"It's really unintended consequences. There's no malice or forethought," said Ed Peterson, associate principal of Cascades Elementary School, where only two of 15 teachers on staff have fewer than 15 years of experience.

The median experience level for a Cascades teacher is 18 years. That's fourth-highest in the district behind the high of 22 years at Bennett Elementary School.

Compare that to Wilson Elementary School, where the staff's median experience is a district-low seven years. Seven of the 20 teachers on staff have five years of experience or less.

Ninety percent of Wilson students are eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches, based on family income. About 38 percent of Bennett students are considered economically disadvantaged.

Dibble Elementary School, where 38 percent of students qualify for subsidized lunches, has a teaching staff whose median experience is 21 years, second-highest in the district.

District officials in the past have proposed giving veteran teachers bonuses for going into classrooms with high numbers of at-risk children like those at Wilson, Northeast Elementary School and McCulloch Academy of Science and Technology, said Superintendent Dan Evans.

But Evans said the idea was met with resistance from principals, who value their veteran teachers, and the union, which covets its seniority system.

"Your hands are tied," he said.

JEA President Mary Lou Konkle did not return repeated phone calls seeking comment on the matter. Instead, Marcia Felegy, the union's Michigan Education Association representative, spoke on behalf of Konkle and the JEA.

"I really don't think this is something the association wants to enter into," Felegy said when asked whether the system has flaws. "It all just hinges on that collective bargaining agreement."

Negotiations on a new contract are set to begin in May.

How the system works

Other urban districts in Michigan with multiple elementary schools have seniority systems similar to Jackson's that allow teachers to move around.

"It's also typical in our national scale," said Ray Telman, executive director of the Middle Cities Education Association, an organization that represents Jackson and 31 other urban districts.

The labor contract between the Jackson district and the 450-member JEA places the power of assembling a school faculty largely with the union and its "bumping" process, rather than with the administration.

When jobs open up, hiring decisions are based on seniority. Bumping occurs when senior teachers bump out less experienced ones, who then seek remaining openings.

"I think it's fair," said Karen J. Smith, who has been a second-grade teacher at Cascades for 11 years. Before that, she spent 12 years at Wilson.

While she was building up seniority, Smith spent her first five years in five different buildings in the Jackson district. Each year ended in a layoff.

Seniority carries less weight in teacher placement in other Jackson County school districts.

Western's school system, for example, does not grant teachers any right to a position held by another teacher, regardless of any perceived difference in qualifications or seniority, according to its union contract.

In East Jackson, the district doesn't allow teachers to switch buildings unless there is a specific academic need elsewhere, Superintendent Bruce Van Eyck said.

However, no other county district is large enough to have as many elementary schools as the nine in Jackson.

District officials acknowledge the system creates "destination schools" where senior teachers choose to bid on a new job because of the school's neighborhood, a popular principal or other reasons.

"Most of the teachers here were here when I got here," said David Reinhart, principal at Bennett and a 36-year administrator with JPS. "Nobody's come up with anything better."

At Bennett, 15 of the 28 teachers have 21 years of experience or more.

"Sometimes people get in a comfort zone, and they stay here," said Reinhart, who came to Bennett after 17 years as principal of Northeast. "It would be an interesting phenomenon if (veteran teachers) went to a (different) school and tried to make things happen."

Wilson's staff changes annually more than any other school, creating an unstable environment for teachers, students and parents, second-year Principal Pamela Perlos said.

"People who want to stay, I'd like them to be able to stay," Perlos said. "But that's not the way it is."

#### Ideas meet resistance

Though veteran teachers are not the only solution to help a struggling school, experts say it's the best way to add stability.

"By and large, experience does matter," said Telman, while acknowledging schools also benefit from younger teachers' energy.

Across the country, urban districts are trying to reform their seniority systems and take veteran teachers out of their comfort zones for the good of children.

"It's one of the reasons why people are looking at providing teachers incentives to go to other schools," said William J. Slotnik, executive director the Boston-based Community Training & Assistance Center, a leading school reform organization.

#### Annual turmoil

Classroom instability in Jackson begins every spring when teachers are laid off because of enrollment



changes or budgetary issues. In recent years, nearly everyone has been called back after the financial picture clears.

But teachers return to work in ways that promote those with more seniority to more desirable schools. A teacher may leave a school like Wilson to fill a vacancy created by a layoff at Bennett, for example. And a teacher laid off from Bennett may find the only available job posting is at Wilson, bumping a teacher with less seniority but who may want to stay there.

"It would be better for the kids if there were the same consistent teachers throughout their four or five years of school," said Sadie Terril, a kindergarten teacher at Wilson.

Terril chose to return to Wilson this year after spending two years teaching in Hudson because she was laid off from the Jackson district in 2004.

The youthfulness of teachers at Northeast Elementary -- where 25 of the 45 teachers have 10 years or less experience -- does not bother parent Pam Uhl.

"I'm very happy with the teachers at Northeast," she said. "They're so helpful with the students."

Perlos has noticed another problem with the constant turnover -- one that costs taxpayers money.

Wilson was one of three district schools to receive a federal Reading First grant. The funds are used to improve a teacher's techniques of teaching reading to students struggling to grasp literacy concepts.

Now she has to have all her new staff trained.

"See, we're back to start," said Perlos, the fourth principal at Wilson in six years.

#### Nationwide issue

The collective-bargaining issue has gained the attention of the New Teacher Project, a national nonprofit organization that is dedicated to improving teacher quality in public schools. The organization published a 2005 study called "Unintended Consequences" about the problems current union seniority systems create in urban schools.

"These staffing rules also hold every school hostage to staffing changes in other schools and ensure that one school's gain is often another's loss," authors wrote.

Kate Walsh, president of the Washington, D.C.-based National Council on Teacher Quality, said teacher-placement systems like the one in Jackson can wreak havoc on some schools.

"The kids who need the good teachers the most get the ones with the least experience," she said. "Stability is an enormous problem for a school."

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## i-Team Investigation: Welfare To Work

(TV5) -- Troy Jones relies on an important bus route get to his job at the Palace of Auburn Hills, over forty miles away from his home in Genesee County. He takes great pride in his job at the home of the Detroit Pistons.

"I've been working there for 2 years," Jones says. "I need that transportation you know?"

But the I-Team has learned that the program is in trouble. Troy Jones finds it disturbing. "That's going to be rough," he says. "I work every day. I need this man!"

It's called the Job Access Reverse Commute Program. Bus riders pay a buck-fifty to and from work, but transportation authorities say the fares alone make up only a fraction of what it costs to run the system.

The program got \$2 million in state and federal dollars last year. Fares bring in \$140,000 every year. Officials reportedly expect just \$200,000 from the federal government this year, and nothing from the state.

Bus rider Demetrice Drake doesn't know why they are having funding problems. "A lot of people ride that bus," she says. "I don't know what the problem is."

Since state funding for the program is also in trouble, we decided to ask Governor Jennifer Granholm about it during her recent visit to Flint. She says her administration actually boosted funding for these types of programs and underscored their importance.

"Public transportation is vital," Granholm said. "It's something heavily needed in Michigan . Unfortunately we haven't gotten the support we need from the feds."

In the end, people like Troy Jones wonder exactly what will happen to them. Will fares go up? Will more government money come in? Or worst yet, will the program be cut?

"We've got to do something," Jones pleads. "I've got to keep my job you know?"

For years welfare recipients have been hearing critics say they should be forced to work. Now, those on welfare wonder why anybody would be putting the brakes to a program that lets them do just that.



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